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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with identification and implementation of simple procedures and skills to help parents and special education teachers work with children and with each other. Discussed are guidelines for school personnel and parents to observe in their communication with each other. (Author/SBN)

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PERSON-TO-PERSON: COMMUNICATION SKILLS
FOR SCHOOL, HOME AND EVERYWHERE¹

Kenneth W. Waugh

The stress produced by our present society has put many pressures on our children, parents and teachers. Problems occur as a result. Teaching and interpersonal relations suffer. Communication skills which aid in understanding is one of the best procedures available to prevent or minimize the development of problems. The success or failure of approaches in special education is as closely tied to effective communication skills as they are to the ideas themselves.

This paper deals with the identification and implementation of very simple procedures and skills to help parents and teachers work with children and also to work with each other. The application of these approaches will assist in the improvement of teaching and understanding and in the positive development of all human relationships.

¹The title of the presentation in Stirling was "Communication and Counseling skills for Student/Family Consultation."

I have changed the title and emphasized the communication skills aspect of the CEC presentation. The 2500 word limitation dictated that the full thrust of the original paper could not be accommodated in a satisfactory way. Many seminar participants in my session asked for copies of the communication skills covered in this 2500 word abstract.



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Effective interpersonal relationships are developed and enhanced by good communication. Whether it is between teacher and parent, parent and child, or simply person and person, good communication is the link that makes it possible to relate in a positive way. Cooperation and understanding is imperative in child-parent-school interactions. These are not possible except as there is clear and effective communication. It is only through communication that we are able to know others and to let them know us. Though there are many roadblocks to effective communication, these can be minimized by the application of various skills which can be learned.

One of the problems in communication is that we tend to think of communication as words and tend to believe that these words have exactly the same meaning to each person involved in the communication process. Also, we see communication as a transaction which is rather explicit and simple. We must realize communication is as much an interaction as it is a transaction.

Communication is mostly a guessing game. We are trying to guess exactly what the other person really means. Words are not precise enough to describe exactly the feelings a person is experiencing nor the visual image he is trying to project. The receiver, on the other hand, must try to guess what the person is experiencing or visualizing. He takes the imprecise message and then has to utilize his own experiences to help give meaning to what was expressed. He therefore is making certain assumptions, attaching labels to the ideas expressed, and then generalizing various concepts and ideas. Each transaction calls for the integration of these hazy and sometimes false assumptions, generalizations and information. The odds are that there is never a transaction in which there is complete congruency between what was sent and

what was received. Each person brings to each communication his values, expectations, perceptions, feelings and ideas which affect his assumptions, guesses and judgments. Because of these factors, the effective communication is one that functions under the basic guideline that "our understanding is probably not complete and I must not assume that it is completely congruent."

Though communication may always be imprecise, a number of possibilities exist for making it clearer and more effective. Zevely, Waugh and Bush (1978) have identified guidelines to improve communication between parents and school personnel. Their premise is that if certain conditions are met and certain guidelines followed, people can be understood regardless of the variance in education, socio-economic level, or experiences. It is generally agreed the "CBers" communicate very effectively with one another. Some of the reasons are that (1) they do not try to impress their "Good Buddy" with their status, (2) they feel free to ask for clarification, (3) they try to establish a warm neighborly attitude and (4) they treat each other as equals with no one talking down to another.

The authors have identified a number of guidelines for school personnel and parents to observe in their communication with each other. From their guidelines, four important generalizations can be drawn - generalizations that apply to communication between any two people:

1. Language which is not only difficult to understand but difficult to accept will restrict positive communication.
2. Accepting the other person as someone with feelings and problems similar to his own encourages listening and feedback and thereby

improves understanding.

3. Each participant must try to be perceptive, keep assumptions tentative, and be willing to take time to arrive at understanding.
4. A person's self concept affects his perceptions and therefore his ability to send and receive clear messages. Good communication requires we help a person to see himself as a person of worth.

Another guideline to apply in effective communication is the use of good listening. Just desiring to be a good listener without a knowledge and implementation of specific skills does not produce an effective listener. One must desire to hear the message being sent as well as to hear the words spoken. Listening is therefore more than simple auditory processing.

One is forced to attend carefully when listening with the intent of being able to reflect back to the speaker the stated and implied message sent. Reflective listening provides a kind of mirror for the speaker to show what the other individual said and it also lets the person know that what he said was heard. Responses which reflect the person's message and the feelings behind the words are labeled open responses. They encourage communication. A closed response tends to cut off communication. They ignore the feelings behind the verbal message. Suppose a child said, "Nobody likes me; Jimmy is always playing with Joe and won't play with me." An example of a closed response would be, "Well, there are other kids to play with; just forget about him." An open response, showing that the listener heard more than the words, might be, "You feel left out and all alone right now." To get the hidden messages, a person must listen with great attention.

Few people realize that many of our problems in communication result from the misuse of some very simple and common words. Inappropriately used, these can be a roadblock along the path to clear understanding. Correcting these

misuses will improve communication. Many times, for example, we use the pronoun "you" when we should use "I". Using "you" instead of "I" may communicate a "put down" or an accusation. For example, if an individual says, "you can't do that" when he really means, "I don't think you can do that," the message may be perceived as a put down. The use of "I" helps to establish ownership of the idea. It helps to "clean up" the communication so each can understand better what is meant. An accusation may be perceived in the statement, "You are not doing your share." A more honest statement is, "I don't think you are doing your share."

Both children and adults like to obtain strength and support by using "we" when they are really referring to themselves. A child may say, "We are always blamed for everything, and we don't like it." A more honest statement is, "I am always being blamed, and I don't like it." It is easier to work with this person if we first attempt to reflect back his thinking as seen through his eyes, as in, "You get blamed for some things that you don't think you should be and you don't like that," or to say more specifically, "What you really mean is 'I am always being blamed and I don't like it.'" Not only do people use "we" to provide strength to state their feelings, but also to acquire anonymity so that blame or ownership can be transferred to someone else.

Many times people transfer feelings to a situation instead of accepting it as their own. One may say, "It is boring." To improve communication, however, one could substitute "I" for "it." The statement would then be, "I am bored." Accepting the fact that he is bored and the situation may not be boring suggests to the person that he is the one who may need to make

some change.

There are many words used in everyday communication which tend to provide a focus away from the person verbalizing to someone else or to some situation. Words such as "no one," "everybody," and "some people" are examples of this type of transfer. It is important that people not transfer blame to someone or something else, but that each accept ownership of his beliefs or feelings - a fact that takes on particular significance in family therapy and in parent/school communication.

The various helping therapies take into consideration the many ways people use words and phrases to keep from assuming responsibility for their actions. Passons (1975) gives many examples of problem words people use which keep them from accepting and/or understanding their behavior. He suggests we can help people by encouraging them to substitute certain words for others. Among the changes he suggests are the following: "can't" to "won't," "need" to "want," "have to" to "need to," or "choose to" and "know" to "imagine."

Although a person may be honest in stating he cannot do something, quite often he is "copping out" because he prefers not to try the task or activity. A parent may say, "I can't make Johnny go to bed," when it is really a case of "I won't make Johnny go to bed." The person is not willing to carry out the specific activity or to attempt to find other alternatives to solve the problem. The more accurate, "I won't make Johnny go to bed" clarifies the real issue for the parent.

Children may use "can't" as a means of defying someone in authority. Success in helping a person accept his real feelings moves that individual one step closer to handling his negative feelings in a more positive way. A

parent or teacher might say to this child, "Change 'can't' to 'won't' and tell me what you are feeling when you won't do it." He may say, "I won't do it and I feel like you are trying to boss me." The authority figure and the child both understand more clearly why he does not do the particular activity in question. Of course a person may not attempt to do a task or activity because of fear of failure. In that case he may say, "I won't do it because I might not do it good enough." Changing "can't" to "won't" can reveal many emotional reasons for behavior. Such revelations can provide us with understanding, which is the goal of communication.

When a person makes a statement including the phrases "have to" or "must do," the implication is that he has no choice, that there is some rule, law or regulation which requires this behavior. Most of the time when a person makes such a statement, he really means he "chooses" to do it. Asking a person to change the "have to" to "choose to" helps him recognize the true situation. Another approach is to ask, "Who is making you do it?" Such a question will help a parent who has made the statement "I always have to clean up the kids room," to see the fallacy in what was said.

Many persons use "know" instead of "imagine" when they are projecting that something is likely to happen. By using "I know" in their statement they treat it as a positive fact instead of its being only a possibility. A parent may say, "I just know this is going to work out to Mary's benefit." Although the odds may suggest this is likely to be the case, one cannot know for sure. If it doesn't, there is undue disappointment. If a teacher makes such a statement to a parent and then the results do not materialize, a parent may assume that the teacher is not very knowledgeable. Cautious use of "I know" is imperative if we are to have positive communication.

We are familiar with the cover-up provided by "they say." It is used

when a person wants to pass gossip or to indulge in fantasy thoughts. It is important that we ask for the identity of "they" so we will know the original source of information, if one indeed exists. Furthermore, asking who "they" is may help the person to see they have accepted a statement as truth, having done little analysis on their own. An obvious question is "What should I do if I ask the person to identify who "they" is and the person refuses?" I should tell the person that until I know the identity, I have no alternative but to treat it as unconfirmed hearsay since I don't know the original source and that I cannot take any action because action must be based on confirmed data.

"Always" and "never" are very exact words but are rarely used that way in our communication. We need to help people eliminate them from communication since there are so few cases where they communicate accurately. Also, they are often loaded with emotions and result in a breakdown in positive communication. When I say, "You always make me angry when you do that," I probably mean, "I am mad at you right now for what you did." The latter statement does not carry the same emotional overtones as the first. The receiver can accept the feeling because it is transitory and changes in attitude may happen.

"Should" and "ought" are words which can give one a feeling of guilt or at least one of discomfort. If I indicate I should do something and then don't do it, "I'm likely to have an anxious feeling. We can help a student or a parent who has made a "should" or "ought" statement by asking him if the doing of it will help more or less than something else he might

do. We can also ask them to give the reasons for doing the action. This helps the person clarify the message he is communicating to himself and to evaluate more clearly whether he really "ought" or "should" do it.

Using the pronoun "you" with "ought" or "should" can generate some negative feelings. These combinations of words suggest that you believe the other person doesn't know what to do, while you do know the appropriate action to take. These words also suggest one doesn't have the character to do the right thing and probably won't. Such implications make for ineffective, not effective, communication.

A parent or teacher must become aware of how ineffectual "why" questions are when inquiring about the reason for his behavior. It is better to ask "what" and "how" questions. These questions invite the student to experience his behavior and provide the parent or teacher some insight into what happened and what might be done to rectify the behavior. If a child has destroyed some property, instead of asking him why he did it, one might say, "What were you feeling then" or "How were you feeling both before and after your actions."

William Passons (1975) gives four reasons why one should avoid "why" questions when confronting one regarding behavior.

- A. They smack of casuality and leads to a search for the cause.
- B. "Why" is too easily answered by "because" which places responsibility on external things.
- C. Leads the questionee to "figuring things out."
- D. "Why" questions are ususally accusatory.

In general, it is often wise to rethink the use of any words or terms that suggest "we know it all." They tend to create resistance and barriers

rather than to improve understanding.

Communication with children may be ineffective because of our failure to recognize the locus of the problem. Dr. Tom Gordon in his books on parent and teacher effectiveness training, emphasized that finding out who really owns the problem is the essential step in determining which communication approach will produce the most effective results. According to Gordon (1970) ownership of a problem is defined in the following way:

1. The child owns the problem if he is thwarted in satisfying a need.
If Billy won't play with Joe and it makes Joe feel left out, Joe has the problem.
2. If the child's behavior is interfering with the parents and they don't like it, then they own the problem. If Joe walks on the new carpet with muddy shoes and it is not bothering Joe, but is bothering the parents, they are the ones with the problem.

If the child owns the problem there is a need to use reflective statements showing you understand. It is necessary to listen to the messages he sends and reflect back both content and feelings expressed. You cannot solve the problem for the child but you can provide the climate to help him solve it.

If the parent owns the problem he needs to help the child to understand his feelings. The best way to communicate these feelings is through "I" messages. The "I" message will simply describe how the child's behavior makes the person feel, whereas "you" messages tend to blame or criticize. If the child has walked on the carpet with muddy shoes, a "you" message might be, "You get out of this room right now; don't you know better than to walk on the carpet?" This message blames and suggests stupidity. An "I" message stated how the act made the person feel and why he felt that way,

It is apparent that many barriers exist in achieving accurate communi-

2 cation between people. While absolutely clear communication is impossible, there is nevertheless much we can do to make it clear. Staying alert to the impreciseness of our attempts to understand each other, practicing attentive listening and using pronouns and other words appropriately are some of the ways we can improve the quality of communication. Communication made more effective in these ways should lead to enhanced understanding and to better relationships between parent and teacher, between adult and child and, simply, between person and person.

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